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ABSTRACT

One high school course in the novel that has proved to be very successful for gifted students requires four novels and--rather than quizzes and oral discussion--analytical papers and responsive journal writing. While the students pace their reading, the teacher can judge by the journal entries whether the students are on schedule. To enhance comprehension, lectures or films are presented as background for the novel being read, and vocabulary study focuses on unfamiliar words in the text. This interdisciplinary approach allows gifted students to decide how they will schedule their reading and writing and to get past the simple cognitive aspects of learning in order to concentrate almost totally on the higher levels of thinking--analysis, synthesis, and application--recommended for gifted students. The papers let them reach as far as they are able, and no teachers are imposing their thoughts on the students. Many students pursue independently some of the tangents created by the background information. This format seems to motivate average students also. They learn not to fear "big novels," since the course eliminates some of the "drag" on reading. It emphasizes reading for idea and enjoyment and promotes self-discipline. (HTH)

TEACHING THE NOVEL: MAINSTREAMING THE GIFTED AND JETSTREAMING THE AVERAGE

by Jean Sunde Peterson

I teach a high school course in the novel with no daily quizzes or tests over content, very little oral discussion, and basically little opportunity for overt negatives from the students. Until recently I never considered that approach to be noteworthy, even though student response has always been enthusiastic. I am the only teacher of a novels course in my district, and my other assignments seem to be discussed more frequently in local shop-talk and at area in-service meetings. I therefore have not often "compared notes."

However, some convention conversations the past two years have caused me to see the peculiar strengths of my method, and lately, as I have been involved in setting up a general program for the gifted in my school, I have looked at it even more closely to see how it relates to the needs of gifted students.

I should explain that I teach a composition course first semester to "average-and-above" sophomores. That is an intensive writing course which also includes vocabulary and grammar study. Second semester I take many of these students into Novel. Even though it is listed in our English curriculum as a "reading" course, a major emphasis is a responsive journal and analytical papers. The sophomore year, then, aims at fluency on paper.

There are four required novels: GRAPES OF WRATH (3 weeks), EXODUS (4 weeks), GIANTS IN THE EARTH (3 weeks), and ETHAN FROME (2 weeks). I have considered changing some of these, but enough students each year claim each novel as "favorite" to warrant keeping all for the present. They read 35-40

pages per day on these required books Monday through Friday. The majority read rather challenging novels from my classroom paperback library for a critical analysis (4 weeks) and a comparative analysis (4 weeks). I do not check to see how far they are each day, although I have a good idea where they are through their weekly journals.

I believe quizzes do not provide the kind of incentive many teachers seem to think they do. With a book as heavy on detail as EXODUS, for example, it becomes a negative with even the best readers to have to think "quiz." I also feel sophomores can develop some important self-discipline through learning how to pace themselves to stay on target. Gifted students need that as much as anyone--sometimes more so.

As for tests and most study guides on novels, I feel they, too, cause students to read too much for detail, at the expense of enjoyment and thinking, and at this level my job is to inspire them to be readers. They will probably forget the details eventually--maybe even quickly, but they will remember the general impact for a long time if they are allowed to immerse themselves freely. In place of tests they write papers, choosing one topic from several I suggest--an in-depth characterization, an analysis of style or setting or conflicts, or some other topic representing the entire novel.

There is very little class discussion. Here I believe that on a normal day I might hear from half of the students once or twice in oral discussion. Rather, I prefer to rely on journals--two sides of a spiral notebook sheet once a week--to let me know how all are responding to what they are reading. I encourage them to react to characters, comment on style or conflicts, or simply complain, cheer, tell me how hard it is to concentrate on the book, or ask questions about what they do not understand. They can also react to

speakers and films I present. I tell them that I want them to discover things on their own, and that I do not want to give them direction in interpretation.

The journals-papers approach really restricts them to communicating about their reading on paper, and they become quite articulate. The writing sharpens their ability to organize, distill, and choose, and we build a rapport through their comments and questions and my marginal notes in response. There is something here, too, that relates to the gifted. Many are quiet and very sensitive, and they hide their good minds. In the journals, however, they are usually willing to be honest and expressive.

I read the journals quickly, marking noteworthy statements with my familiar "plus" (+) in the margin, often writing quick marginal notes. In my gradebook I mark an "X" if it is adequate and on time, an "X" with an extra "/" if it shows exceptional effort or thought, a "half X" (/) if it is only half there. When it is late, the "X" is circled. The procedure is very simple. At the end of the quarter I letter-grade them according to the number of X's and circles. They do a lot of writing, but it does not demand a great investment of time for me. On 1 or 2 days each week I read journals while they take a vocabulary test or work on journals. The students seem to sense a sort of mutual participation, and they go about their work fairly conscientiously. I can call them up individually to explain something mentioned in their journals, and they are also free to browse through bulletin board articles, supplementary materials, and posted papers.

A graduate reading course I took recently confirmed a suspicion I had had that comprehension is enhanced more by experience in life than by decoding skills. Therefore perhaps twice a week I lecture, bring in speakers or show films as background to the novel being read--on the Depression for GRAPES OF

WRATH, on Judaism or Nazi philosophy or the Middle East or current events for EXODUS, on foreign languages or on our own local pioneer history for GIANTS. We also listen to Edvard Grieg and see slides from our local heritage center for GIANTS. It becomes rather interdisciplinary, an approach often recommended for the gifted.

I used to be horrified at how little my students understood about the world--even about basic geography, not to mention other cultures and other ways of thinking. I am still appalled at how narrow their worlds are, but now I simply assume they are narrow and proceed--into geography, history, the arts, and whatever else applies.

I clarify matters from the novel only when several journals indicate confusion on some point or when experience tells me to help them along with some brief explanation. I continue to tell them how proud I am of their insights--arrived at without my help. Often, after a unit is done, I convey some things the "experts" say about the novel, but, for the most part, they are on their own.

Our vocabulary study seems to be a rather popular aspect of the course. Each Monday I spend about 15 minutes explaining 25-30 words, listed on the chalkboard, which are from the novel currently being read or soon to be read. I put each one into several contexts, and the students write down whatever they want to--synonyms, definitions, possible contexts. On Tuesday, Wednesday, and Thursday I spend about 5 minutes each day reviewing them, emphasizing context, rather than definition. Then on Friday there is a test, putting words into contexts, sometimes using contexts from the novel. These tests can be student-checked at the end of the class period, and they take little teacher time--that is, after the first year, when the tests must be composed. I use

the same system during the first-semester composition course, and by the end of the year they have had approximately 1000 words. I try to precede each novel unit with most of the words from the novel, and the students are grateful, according to their journals. The repetition and emphasis on context result in good retention. This is actually a foreign language teaching technique--words repeated over a period of time and used in context. After all, these new words are often like a "foreign language" for the students, and they need that language to read the novels.

Why do I consider all this so effective for the gifted student? Because each unit is open-ended. Students can read related novels and write about them in their journals if they finish early. They are also on their own: they decide how they will schedule their reading and writing. There is room for them to get past the simple cognitive aspects of learning and to concentrate almost totally on the higher levels of thinking--analysis, synthesis, application--basic to gifted education. The papers let them reach as far as they are able, and no teacher is imposing his thoughts on them. They also like the background presentations, and many pursue some of these tangents further on their own. The format, in fact, probably appeals most to the gifted. They are with their peers, mainstreamed, but the course encourages them to think and explore "beyond the pack."

However, it seems to energize the other students, too. In fact, I usually see the largest growth in the "average." Their vocabularies grow, and the "experience" of the novels stimulates growth in awareness. Their journals are quite inspiring in this regard. Students--mediocre as well as gifted--find they tune in more to the news and to books in general after this course. They learn not to fear "big novels," and they learn that much can be

experienced through novels.

Just as the "jetstream" is a high-speed, high-altitude air current, which can enhance flying speed, this course eliminates some of the "drag" on reading. It enhances speed, while emphasizing reading for idea and enjoyment, and it promotes self-discipline. When they conquer a heavy, thought-provoking novel, write a nice paper, and turn in their journals, students have a solid sense of accomplishment. I encourage them to share those journals and papers with their parents, who give me nice feedback and gratitude at parent conferences. I treat such public-relations emphasis seriously. Positives in that direction might allow me to continue what I am doing a little longer.

Once the basic routine is established, there is no need for any weekly questioning or groaning over whether something is due. They know that already--from the schedule established at the outset. That is my "absence of negatives." Even when someone is having difficulty with a novel at first, or is falling behind, the fact that he can tell me that in the journal eliminates audible grumbling in class. I can also imply that most are doing well or that many are past the halfway point and are finding a faster pace, or I can simply convey some of the journal profundities to the class. In other words, I can stress the positive, and if a student is procrastinating, I can help him see that he does not have much company. He soon stops bragging about how far he is behind.

In the final exam, by necessity objective, I include the last vocabulary list only, literary terms, some general questions about the novels read, and major titles and authors--discussed during the comparative analysis unit near the end of the course. Usually I count their final paper as 1/3 of their final exam grade, since writing is so much emphasized in the course.

One night my eighth-grader daughter cried as she labored over her fifteenth (or so) daily study guide for ACROSS FIVE APRILS. Every day there had been about 20 questions--many over minor details. Answers were "wrong" if vague questions were misinterpreted. She said she hated the book and wondered why her teacher would not let her enjoy it. A good reader was disliking a good book, and that made me sad. I did not like that plodding approach when I was a student either. Maybe that is why I teach the novel the way I do. And it is good for the average and the gifted alike.